

Virtual virtuosity: Sunday, November 12

*Mark 12:38-44*

by [Robin R Meyers](#) in the [November 1, 2000](#) issue

My favorite Kierkegaardian parable is called “The Man Who Walked Backwards.” The Danish philosopher was particularly hard on religious professionals, and claimed that inconsistent behaviors most often accompany exorbitant professions of good intentions:

When a man turns his back upon someone and walks away, it is so easy to see that he walks away, but when a man hits upon a method of turning his face towards the one he is walking away from, hits upon a method of walking backwards while with appearance and glance and salutations he greets the person, giving assurances again and again that he is coming immediately, or incessantly saying “Here I am”—although he gets farther and farther away by walking backward—then it is not so easy to become aware. And so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good.

For Kierkegaard, what mattered most was the gulf between concept and capacity. And who is most susceptible to this confusion? Why, church leaders, of course, who are not only paid to be virtuous, but are expected to talk about it all the time.

After all, how does one become gracious? By reading a good book on the subject? Perhaps by appointing a committee to study graciousness and pass a resolution? And what about mercy and forgiveness? Can this ever be a calculated behavior, something you decide to “do today,” part of what the power-of-positive-thinking folks call a “life strategy”?

The most insidious thing about being a “parson” (the person) who agrees to be on display as an example of what the gospel actually *does* to a person is that an insidious, largely subconscious form of compensation begins to produce a kind of “virtual virtuosity.” The performance becomes the product. We must be a caring person, we think to ourselves—after all, we are always recommending it. We must

be sensitive, patient and kind, because we just finished a sermon series on all three, and lots of people have requested copies.

This means that Jesus was warning people to beware of folks like me—and perhaps you. We do indeed like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. We like to have the best seats wherever we go, and we do devour the houses of widows—especially if they are rich, and in a mood to name our church in their will.

For the sake of appearances we do say long prayers. When given a chance to pray before our colleagues, we often feel the need to cover every cause, name every country, and in a marathon of self-righteousness, write every last vestige of prayerfulness out of prayer by making it not a moment to confess dependence and gratitude, but the closing argument of a self-nominated saint. No wonder Jesus preferred the prayer of the publican. At least God was the intended audience.

As for the widow's mite, we have praised her devotion a zillion times, but none of us really wants a whole congregation full of generously self-sacrificing poor people, do we? This is a wonderful idea, but a disaster for the annual budget. We are much more likely to pray for people who give more abundantly out of their abundance than to praise the person who gives us a truly heroic pittance. Let's hear it for "large sums in the treasury." This is you and me he's talking about.

Whatever else may be true about this text, we are the intended audience—you and me. Because what could be stranger than to live the upwardly mobile life while preaching the downwardly mobile gospel? Or preen like peacocks when we gather for festivals of righteousness, and fear being passed over when the names of the beautiful people are read aloud?

Why have some mega-churches blurred the line between worship and entertainment? Dare we ask why anyone needs Christian aerobics? And when did prayers of confession begin to seem morbid? When did liturgies of contrition and dependence become examples of negative thinking? And when did sanctuaries become auditoriums with an orchestra pit but no cross—to serenade people with wholesome and charismatic infomercials for Jesus? This is you and me he's talking about.

There is hope, of course. For all of us who dress up and profess the faith for a living, there ends up being one rather simple but critical decision to make. Either we role-play the faith until we acquire more of it, trapping ourselves with our own words. Or we let our appearances “stand in” for the real thing, until gradually we become unrecognizable in the pulpit, especially to those who love us.

No one expects us to be perfect (that’s an easy out). But they do expect us to be better than average. Otherwise, this text is too close for comfort, and Kierkegaard knew it: “In the magnificent cathedral the Honorable and Right Reverend Geheime-General-Ober-Hof-Pradikant, the elect favorite of the fashionable world, appears before an elect company and preaches with emotion upon the text he himself elected: ‘God hath elected the base things of the world, and the things that are despised.’ And nobody laughs.”